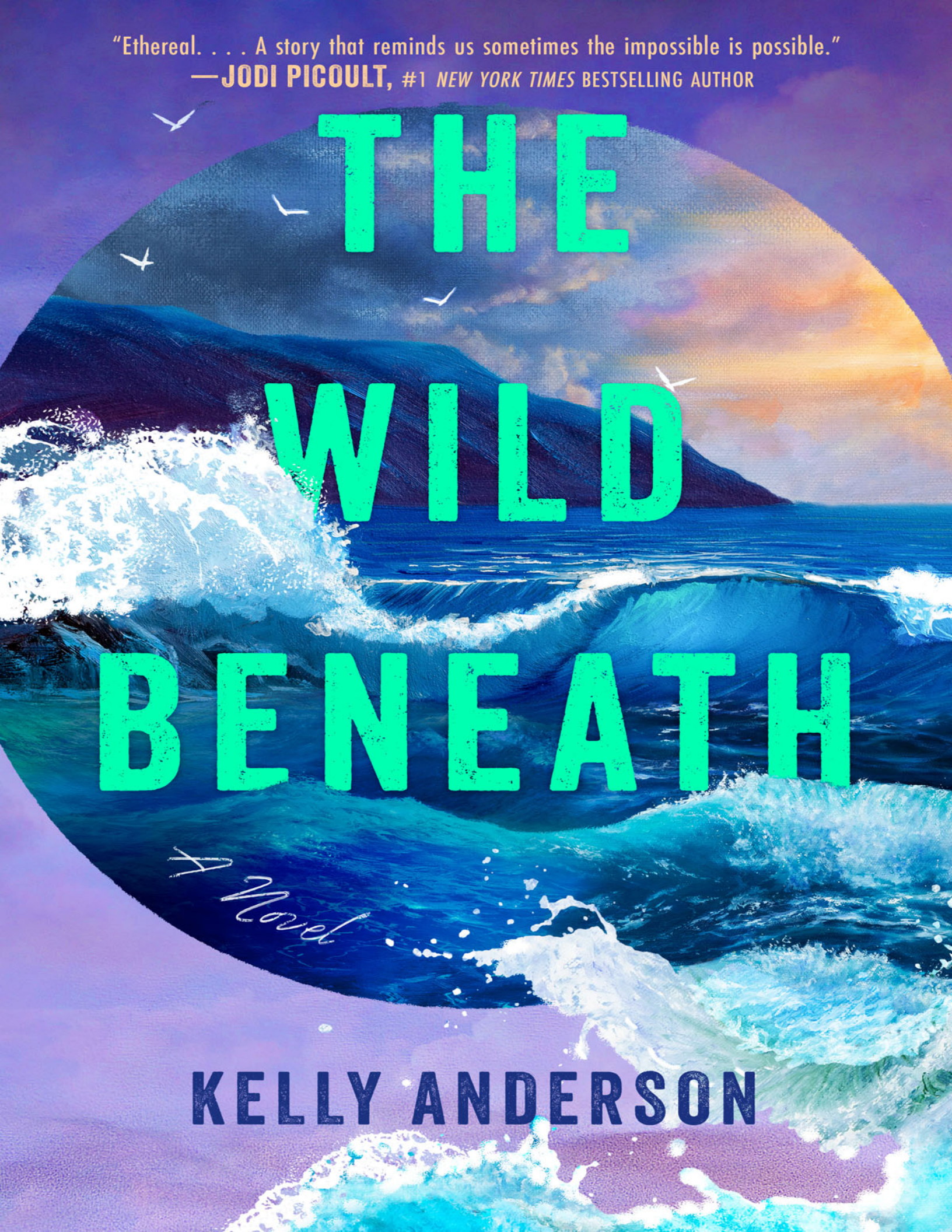


"Ethereal. . . . A story that reminds us sometimes the impossible is possible."
—JODI PICOULT, #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The background of the cover is a circular illustration. It depicts a dramatic coastal scene. In the foreground, a large, white-capped wave is crashing towards the viewer. Behind it, the ocean stretches to a dark, silhouetted cliff. The sky is a mix of deep blue, purple, and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. Several white birds are shown in flight against the sky. The title 'THE WILD BENEATH' is written in large, bold, teal-colored capital letters across the center of the image.

THE WILD BENEATH

A Novel

KELLY ANDERSON

THE
WILD
BENEATH

KELLY ANDERSON



Dedication

For Logan and Leo

Epigraph

Her song was so beautiful that it could take people back to all the things they wished they had done, and all the things they wished they could be.

—Erica Bauermeister, *The Scent Keeper*

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Prologue

She begins with a lullaby that sends coyotes fleeing up mountains. Honeybees abandon their hives to the shrill calls of songbirds and barking dogs. Beneath the seafloor, the tectonic plates loosen and rearrange.

The radio waves will say: *All stations, this is not a drill. A magnitude 9.0 earthquake has been detected off the coast of British Columbia approximately 150 kilometres west of Tofino. Evacuate all coastal areas immediately. Do not approach shorelines. Follow evacuation routes. Repeat, this is not a drill.*

A liquid mountain rises in the Pacific Northwest.

When the wave makes landfall, it slices through houses. Lights fall out of their ceiling tiles while furniture shunts across living rooms. Fridges disgorge their contents into surging black whirlpools. Mailboxes, front doors, and slabs of driveway asphalt sail away in the foamy whitewash.

Things from her belly that do not belong are hurled back ashore: tangles of Christmas lights, milk jugs, broken microwaves. The innards of sunken container ships. Lawn chairs and pastel-coloured birthday candles, uninstalled car radios and alarm clocks with twist-tied cords.

Her haunting chorus crescendos. Overturned office buildings disintegrate into rushing river water. Glass shatters. Traffic lights creak and buckle inside tentacles of ocean. Sucking mud overtakes the ground floors of hospitals.

Floating bodies. Human beings with broken bones, eyes stinging from salt, inhaling seawater into their lungs while trapped underwater, beneath overturned cars and downed tree branches. People on their hands and knees.

The nationwide news will report: *A catastrophic earthquake struck the Cascadia Subduction Zone at 10:50 a.m. today, triggering tsunami waves*

along the outer coast. This is the big one we've long feared.

The ocean will call it a song.

Hours pass before she drains away, taking what she wants, leaving behind her low tide.

Coastal towns go silent. Gaping shells of buildings remain, puddles of water on their roofs. A shoreline scattered with dead jellyfish, plastic piping. Bird feathers and the bones of whales.

Low

The lowest tide requires resilience. The seafloor is exposed. Tide pool inhabitants—barnacles, mussels, anemones, and small fish—must weather exposure to sun, air, and temperature fluctuations and survive until the water returns.

Chapter 1

Now

Annie MacLeod can't hear the sea.

She drags a shovel and a white plastic bucket under a blanket of clouds that refuses to leave. Wind-whipped, hair unwashed, a smear of sand on her cheek. She's digging for clams. She hasn't gone near the water yet, even though it's been four days since it happened. Even though her body craves that cold shock on her skin, to submerge so deep she dissolves. The waves curl out and back, a heartbeat she ignores by squishing bright orange earplugs deeper into her ears.

The beach is a junkyard. The surf picks up stray flip-flops, pebbles mixed with Plexiglas shards, waxed juice boxes with straws still attached, floaty aluminum cans, and plastic barrettes. She eyes the glint of a silver spoon—its handle engraved with the delicate pattern of moon phases—and puts it in her back pocket next to a cake of soap still in its wrapper.

Each day, her grandmother Ruth tells her to work harder. To get her tears out with a shovel. "Maybe they're not dead," she says.

Sand is everywhere now: up on the hill where it doesn't belong, lodged between cedar shingles, filling up eavestroughs. Lumps of it, with rainwater, will gradually rinse out the downspouts, making new piles. Some of it is stuck inside the helices of Annie's ears, glued to her scalp, wedged under her nails. They cannot find a nail clipper anywhere, and Annie thinks about biting her nails but then the sand would even be inside her.

No matter how hard she tries to get it all out, she finds more still, in the sink drain, embedded in the seams of the mattress, in the plastic utensil divider in the kitchen drawer, in the thumb of Ruth's oven mitt.

Her grief is like this.

Sprinkles of it in what she manages to eat, gritty against her teeth even when the food tastes fine. She's already swept the floor, but it's silty again.

Annie wonders if she'll ever escape it; if the places sand and grief should not be will ever be free of them again.

The horizon remains empty and haunting. Only the swoop of seabirds, the smell of decaying seaweed, and all the debris at the wrack line. The ground is

disorienting and overly flat.

How long has she been out here? It must be hours. The wind burns her eyes, her stomach growls, and her shoulders ache. She's after another clam, her arm down a hole, when she's distracted by movement in her peripheral vision. The clam gets away and burrows further into the muck.

She sits down next to an upside-down picnic table and hugs her knees—not long enough to start dwelling on everything or start crying again. Just for a minute. The backs of her pants are soaked through and sticking to her skin and the spoon and soap are bulky in her pocket. For an instant, the clouds part. The sand glimmers.

A thwump-thwump rises beneath her.

Each beat lasts a few languid seconds. Each thwump sinks her down, as if her bones go slack against each other, as if her muscles give themselves up to her scooped-out insides.

A shape forms in the distance and moves along the stretches of sand. Annie stands up for a better look. It's a person walking. But no one's been out this far from Hale's Landing since the tsunami, and there's hardly anyone left.

Annie removes her earplugs and looks up for a helicopter, looks around for a speedboat hopping over waves. Anything else to explain the thwumping.

Nothing.

She leaves the shovel and the bucket where they are and walks toward the person, then jogs, with the faint hope that it's her mom or dad. That they've made it back.

But it's not them. It's a boy, or a man. She isn't sure. He's stark naked, she can tell that much.

Annie calls out: "Hello?"

He doesn't respond.

She moves closer, until he's right in front of her. He can't be more than twenty years old, close to her own age, but well over six feet tall, with soaked blond hair that shines like the water.

"Where did you come from?"

His unfreckled skin makes her squeamish. It feels too translucent. He doesn't look injured. She would have expected cuts and scrapes or broken limbs. She would have expected him to be wearing clothes if he'd been pulled out and stranded by the wave.

"Are you okay?" she tries again.

He doesn't say anything. Unnerved by his nakedness, his silence, his lack of urgency and explanation, she tries not to stare at his pale flesh. He has a

startling vacancy about him, not fully there, looking past her. His irises are sea-urchin grey with streaks of silver.

His eyes roll backward as he caves sideways onto the sand into a fetal position.

Annie crouches and shakes him hard by the shoulder. His skin is too hot. The thwumping sound from earlier pours up through her palms. She shakes him again and checks his wrist for a pulse. It's there: a too-slow beat at her fingertips. A wave breaks up into his face and even that doesn't wake him. She turns him by his knees onto his back. She'll have to drag him, even if the plastic shards and cracked shells and crab legs and bottle caps will scrape his jelly-skin.

No choice.

She wraps her hands tight around his forearms. He's heavier than he looks, and his skin is spongy and slimy and gives too much. She pulls hard and manages to move him a few feet, looks over her shoulder to gauge how far they are from the dry sand, then pulls again, clears debris from under him, pulls. Growls. Drags him, as her thoughts get more and more clunky. This hypnotic beat in her body.

The sound climbs up and surrounds them; Annie and this boy, marooned on the edge of nowhere.

Chapter 2

Twenty years before

Dr. Aiden MacLeod cannot see land.

The Pacific Ocean stretches in all directions from where he stands barefoot in the cockpit. It's midafternoon and a light wind flutters the mainsail. The ocean ripples, a patchwork of sequins.

"You're overthinking it," Mara says with her paring knife poised. She's eight months pregnant, cross-legged behind him, wearing one of his old T-shirts and a bathing suit bottom. A glistening salmon rests on the wooden cutting board in front of her.

"You can't predict this." Aiden grips the helm. He's said it before, and even to his own ears it sounds repetitive. "What about operating rooms? Oxygen tanks?"

"I want to be sailing." Mara looks at him.

He imagines it all going wrong out here when the baby is born: a breech delivery, shoulder dystocia, a massive hemorrhage. He's transported back in time to all-nighters in hospital hallways that smelled like iodine, the sensation of running to catch up with something.

"I'm not going back to a hospital." She stands up, nearly a foot shorter than him. On her tiptoes she intertwines her fingers at the back of his neck. He inhales the scent of her sun-warmed skin. "We've talked about this."

"I need you to be okay."

"We'll be fine." Mara's voice is an anchor. She kisses him and nuzzles against the stubble of his jaw. Then she sits back down, delicately slipping the edge of her knife under the scales to release pink shimmering flesh and the smell of salt.

Aiden's mother, Ruth, did not think they'd be fine. Fifty kilometres east is his hometown, Hale's Landing, with its pine-needled roads and cedars dripping in endless rain. He recalls the exact tone of Ruth's voice as it echoes in the cathedral of his forehead.

When he tied off the stern at Hale's Wharf last Tuesday, Ruth gave him a quick peck on the cheek and lectured him briefly about his boat's peeling bottom paint. Then she whisked herself off to the clinic in her pressed

nursing scrubs. She's probably weighing a baby right now under those bright fluorescent lights, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking over the scrubbed linoleum. Even though Aiden doesn't work there, his medical degree hangs in her waiting room above the aquarium of tropical fish, the air bubbles surging up and bursting under the edge of the thick, black frame.

Aiden never loved medicine. As a kid, he drove his rusty fishing dinghy long before he could drive a car. He woke in the early morning, threw off the lines, and motored down the channel, a fishing rod in hand. What he loves most is the sea, this rugged Pacific Northwest coast: the rhythmic lap of waves, euphoria of endless sky, swirling patterns of tides. It disentangles him. He doesn't need to be anything he's not.

He met Mara at the hospital four years ago. She was strange; everyone noticed it. A bit feral. Hardly talked. But to Aiden she was heart-stopping—skin so pale it was ghost-like, and stone-grey eyes. A line was drawn. The before and after meeting Mara. It wasn't long before they bought this boat and painted the name *Amphitrite* in gold cursive on the transom.

She'd always wanted to live on a sailboat, which was just one of the many unusual things about her. She liked to swim in the middle of the night. In the ebony water, she wrapped her legs around him, fused their bodies together, kissed his open mouth. She always stayed in the water the longest. She tracked the cyclic phases of the moon, mapped constellations in a spiral notebook on the charting table.

Ruth did not approve. "It's impractical," she said to Aiden while replenishing the Band-Aids and syringes in the clinic's back hallway. "Living on a boat after all you've studied for, Aiden. Think of everything you'll be throwing away." She forced an overstuffed drawer closed.

As the son of a single mother, even at thirty-four years old, Aiden still leans toward doing what Ruth expects.

Mara finishes gutting the fish and slices it into neat fillets for the grill. She goes below to scrub the cutting board and wash her hands. Even so pregnant, she moves as if she's hovering two inches off the deck, swimming through air. Where does she get this ease? Wherever it is, the more time he spends with her, the more it rubs off on him.

Back up on deck, light radiates from her skin. She puts her warm palms on his face and kisses him again.

"Trust me," she says.

And he does. His shoulders descend. It feels like he's loved her longer than the years they've been together; illogically, it feels like he's always known her. The light fades into a burning sunset. The night unfolds with constellations that Mara cannot stop watching.

A month later, Mara paces below deck with each contraction. Aiden keeps watch, up and down, up and down the companionway. Thankfully, there's no wind. The sea lies pancake flat. His face is a facade of calm.

He uses his portable Doppler ultrasound and listens to the tap-tap-tap of the fetal heartbeat. Mara doesn't want the Doppler. She tries to shoo him away, but he persists, a divot of concern crossing his forehead.

Mara wants to swim as she labours.

"We're in the middle of the Pacific, Mara." Aiden keeps his voice level.

"People give birth in the water all the time," she hums.

He puts his palm on her belly. "It's freezing."

There's no stopping her. Soon enough she's floating on her back, in less pain. The contractions are easier. On the swim ladder, Aiden stands and holds the Doppler out to her stomach as she floats. The tap-tap-tap stays strong. He watches the heart rate. She watches the moon.

"It's time." Mara wipes her upper lip and pushes her hair from her eyes.

"Come back on board." Aiden reaches a hand toward her. "I won't be able to see what I'm doing."

She shakes her head.

The divot in his forehead deepens as he considers what to do next. Mara will not relent; he knows this of her. He takes off his boots, his pants, throws them into the cockpit, and grabs a life jacket and a rope. After securing a line between himself and the transom handhold, he slides into the bite of cold salt water.

"Jesus," he breathes.

Mara's gaze is unfocused.

"You have to come closer, Mara." He grips her arm and pulls her to the ladder, so she can slide herself onto the middle step. "Hook your arms through the handholds."

She does.

He'll have to float in front of her, somehow, as she pushes. He swears under his breath. This is the last place he ever expected to be delivering a baby, let alone his own. With her left calf under his right armpit, and the rope holding them both, he suspends himself between Mara's legs.

"It's time to push." She barely whispers it.

Aiden can't see anything beneath the dark surface; he'll have to help her by feeling alone. He balances with his feet spread on the lowest rung of the ladder and his hands between her legs. In the glow of the boat's running lights, her face is contorted and red.

"Breathe," he says.

Mara jams her right foot into his shoulder and pushes. He prays the rope holds them while she writhes against the ladder.

“You’re doing it,” he says.

Her next moan is long and primal.

The scent of blood and seawater. Aiden feels a head, then a small shoulder. An arm. The rest of a warm body sliding into his waiting grasp. He does not breathe until the baby—resting upon his trembling, numb hands—reaches the water’s surface.

It’s a girl. She takes a breath of air, then wails.

Mara has tears in her eyes.

Annie is born to the sea. Aiden can breathe now. When he looks down at his daughter, he wonders if his entire reason for being has been poured into this one tiny body.

By the time Annie is three years old, it’s impossible for Aiden to keep hold of her.

They’ve managed through toddlerhood on *Amphitrite*. He installed netting around the lifelines and tethered a child safety harness to the mast. They keep a playpen up against the berth for when the seas are roughest.

But Annie won’t stay inside it; she wants the rush of wind and the spray of salt water. In a particularly strong gale that winter, she demands to stay topside. She belly-laughs and calls out for more as the sailboat rises and drops over the waves.

Her legs are strong and fast and always moving. Come spring, Aiden chases her along the shoreline, blue-green algae under their feet. She finds a pink-tipped sea anemone at the edge of a rocky tide pool. Its tentacles reach up as if it wants to be touched. Next, an itty-bitty octopus that Annie collects in the cup of her palms, its double row of suckers attached to her skin. All day she plays on the shore. Her bucket is full of ribbed limpet shells and sand dollars. The crabs do their sideways scuttles in the sand during her endless game of catch and release.

When she’s not running the beach, Annie swims. The first day of summer that year, brown pelicans swoop overhead as she and Mara float on their backs under an expanse of sky.

“Come back aboard!” Aiden calls, his voice carrying over the waves.

“Dinner’s getting cold.”

But they do not. They splash him instead, grinning ear-to-ear. Water drips from their golden hair.

Aiden and Mara make ends meet selling catch to Rosie, the fishmonger at Hale's Wharf. Installed behind the same wooden counter since Aiden was little, Rosie doesn't seem to age. Her dyed-black hair is always pulled into a ponytail, shellacked in place. Perhaps her dirty apron used to be whiter, but she clicks away at her cash register like she always has. John, her husband, sells Aiden fish and chips out the back kitchen window: fried cod wrapped in newspaper with a plastic container of coleslaw slathered in mayonnaise.

Otherwise, they rarely come ashore. When they bought *Amphitrite*, Aiden wondered if he'd find it unsettling to not have a home with a foundation and walls, or a reasonable square footage. Maybe they should've purchased a bigger boat? He sold his car, whittled down his mystery novel collection to the few that fit in the berth, and donated his spare clothing. He occasionally misses having a full-sized refrigerator and a flushing toilet. In the end, though, *Amphitrite* feels more like home than any house he's had. With Mara and Annie inside, the boat is all he needs.

On a hot day midsummer, Aiden and Ruth stand on the beach at Hale's Landing. The sun is directly overhead, burning the top of Aiden's head. Annie has been swimming off the wharf for hours. Now she dives in again, this time to retrieve a spiny-skinned sea star from the bottom. Next, a rock covered in acorn barnacles.

Aiden and Ruth ooh and aah at her finds.

"Come get some goggles," Ruth calls, holding out a neon-green pair. "You'll see better!" They dangle from her fingers.

Annie looks over briefly, then bobs under again.

An elderly couple stroll by. They look like tourists, wearing matching windbreakers and bright white running shoes, ice cream cones in their hands.

"She swims so well. And so young!" the woman marvels. She licks the melting soft-serve from her fingers.

"She's a little fish," Aiden comments.

"I really wish you'd make her wear a life jacket," Ruth says, as Annie ducks under the water's surface and out of sight.

Aiden clears his throat, a habit of his when he doesn't know what to say.

"The ocean's wild," Ruth pushes. "Better to keep her safe."

Later, Aiden tries to put her in a life jacket, but Annie refuses. She dives back in. He chases her underwater through the forest of kelp, its emerald-green fronds dancing in the current. But she's gone in a trail of bubbles,

faster than he can swim, only popping her head up much further away than he could have managed. She can hold her breath far longer than he can.

Chapter 3

Now

Annie leaves the boy on the beach.

She's back in a few minutes, accompanied by Ruth, in her muddy gumboots and bleached-out Vancouver Aquarium sweatshirt, a medical bag slung over one shoulder. They climb down the rope ladder they've rigged from the bluff to the beach. At the bottom, Ruth gives the boy a head-to-toe once-over, kneels beside him on the sand, and places two fingers on the side of his neck.

It feels awkward to stare at him, but Annie can't stop. The fine hair on his arms . . . was it there before? His skin appears firmer, more assembled. More like skin and less like see-through rice paper. Her eyes find their way to the sharp angle of his jaw and the steep slant of his nose.

"Has a pulse." Ruth nods. "Let's roll him onto his side." She covers him with a flannel blanket she retrieved from the cedar trunk beside the front door; the same trunk Annie has to steel herself for before opening, the one with her dad's old clothes and their faint smell of fish.

Ruth wedges the oxygen sat probe on the boy's left index finger. His hands are large and smooth. The probe beeps and glows 99 percent on the screen, pulse 32 beats per minute.

"Too slow," Annie says.

Ruth pauses. "Maybe it's a poor tracing." She digs in her bag for a stethoscope, applies the diaphragm to his chest, and listens to his heart and lungs in a looping repetition.

The thwumping sound from earlier seems to be right here.

"Do you hear that noise?" Annie asks.

"What noise?" Ruth cocks her head, but the stethoscope is still in her ears.

"We have to get him up to the cabin," she says.

"It's thirty feet up. He's too heavy."

"We can't leave him here," Ruth says. "He needs an IV. He's probably dehydrated. Hypothermic."

"But his skin's hot."